

RE: Why the Local Board's Denial Was Contrary to the Best Interests of Students, the LEA, and the Community

INTRODUCTION

The Memphis-Shelby County School Board's decision to deny the Dream Catchers Academy charter application—despite its alignment with state standards, extensive community support, and pre-approval for a \$750,000 State of Tennessee / federal startup grant—was not only unfounded but contrary to the best interests of homeless students, the district's innovation mandate, and the broader Shelby County community.

This statement is submitted pursuant to T.C.A. § 49-13-108 to respectfully request that the Tennessee Public Charter School Commission overturn the local denial and approve the Dream Catchers Academy application.

I. The Denial Harms the Most Vulnerable: Homeless and Housing-Insecure Youth

The decision directly undermines educational access and equity for Shelby County's nearly 2,000 homeless students, many of whom experience unstable school placements, chronic absenteeism, and trauma-related academic barriers. These students often transfer between five to ten schools over the course of their academic careers, leading to fractured learning experiences and devastating dropout rates.

Widely respected by Republicans and Democrats alike, House Democratic Leader and lifelong Memphian Rep. Karen Camper issued a forceful plea in her July 28, 2025 letter to the MSCS Board (Exhibit A), underscoring the stakes for Shelby County's most vulnerable youth:

"I urge you, in the strongest possible terms, to approve the charter application for Dream Catchers Academy, a school designed to serve one of the most vulnerable and often forgotten populations in Shelby County—our homeless and housing-insecure youth."

She rightly emphasizes that the issue at stake is not political, procedural, or institutional—it is human:

"The approval of this school is not just a procedural decision—it is a moral imperative."

By denying the application, the Board has blocked a unique, targeted, trauma-informed K–12 solution designed from the ground up for this population.

II. The Denial Contradicts the State’s Endorsement and Federal Investment

The Tennessee Department of Education has already approved Dream Catchers Academy for a \$750,000 federal start-up grant under the Charter School Program (CSP). This pre-approval—based solely on the strength of the school’s original application—demonstrates the state’s clear support for the school’s mission, governance, and need.

Rep. Camper wrote:

“The State of Tennessee has already approved a \$750,000 federal start-up grant for Dream Catchers Academy based on the strength of its academic model, leadership, and mission. This grant is contingent upon your local approval.”

This contradiction between local rejection and state-level investment exposes a disconnect between the urgent needs of underserved students and the bureaucratic lens through which the Charter Office has reviewed this proposal.

III. The Denial Ignores the School’s Role as a Partner, Not a Competitor

Rather than undermining the work of MSCS, Dream Catchers Academy is designed to complement and enhance the district’s efforts by filling a well-documented service gap. MSCS currently has no single-site school specifically tailored for homeless and housing-insecure students. Dream Catchers would be the first in the district—and potentially the nation—to provide this wraparound academic environment from K–12.

Rep. Camper emphasized:

“This school stands not in competition with Memphis-Shelby County Schools but in partnership, filling a gap that no traditional school has been equipped to address at this scale.”

This partnership model should be embraced—not rejected—as a reflection of innovation, compassion, and modern governance. MSCS would have the opportunity to become a national leader by supporting the first charter school of its kind.

IV. The Denial Undermines Public Trust and Further Damages the LEA's Notorious Image

By rejecting Dream Catchers Academy, the MSCS Board has fueled the growing narrative that the district is incapable of course correction—justifying state-led takeover plans already taking shape in Nashville, led by both State Senator Brent Taylor and State Rep. Mark White. This decision reinforces the perception that MSCS is hostile to innovation, even when such innovation is clearly in the best interest of students, families, and the community.

As Rep. Camper reminds us:

“Homelessness is not merely a housing issue—it is an educational crisis.”

Turning away a school model explicitly designed to confront this crisis sends the wrong message to families, stakeholders, and state officials who are working toward systemic solutions.

CONCLUSION

In closing, the Memphis-Shelby County School Board's denial of Dream Catchers Academy was not based on a lack of legal compliance, educational rigor, or public demand—it was based on an internal recommendation process that failed to grasp the broader ethical, academic, and social implications of this opportunity.

Rep. Camper's words encapsulate the urgency and clarity of this moment:

“We have a duty to support innovation when it is paired with compassion and community collaboration... The state has recognized its promise. Now, the responsibility lies with you to make that promise a reality.”

We respectfully request that the Commission grant approval of Dream Catchers Academy in the best interests of homeless students, the MSCS district, and the greater Shelby County community.

Respectfully submitted,


Kimberly Adams

President of the Board of Trustees- Dream Catchers Academy